

Socialism

Not in the United States

By Seymour Martin Lipset

For radicals, the notion of “American exceptionalism,” first noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in terms of the society at large, has always meant a more specific question: Why did the United States, alone among industrial societies, lack a significant socialist movement or labor party? This question bedeviled socialist theorists from the late nineteenth century on.

Before the Russian Revolution, European radicals were deeply concerned with the failure of their American political brethren, for it pitted their belief in the inevitability of socialism against the inner logic of Marxism, expressed by Karl Marx in the preface to *Das Kapital*: “The country that is more developed industrially shows to the less developed the image of their future.”¹ There is no questioning the fact that from the last quarter of the nineteenth century on, the most developed country has been the United States. The United States should, as many pre-World War I socialists argued, have provided a classic example of socialism, with its working class the most supportive.

The continued inability of socialists to create a viable movement in the US was therefore a major embarrassment to Marxist theorists. Max Beer, whose fifty-year career in international socialism included participation in the Austrian, German, and British parties, described the anxiety among European Marxists created by the weakness of socialism in America. The United States, he said, was a “living contradiction of... Marxian theory,” and raised fundamental questions about its validity.²

In trying to explain the absence of a socialist movement, many socialist writers have described America in terms not dissimilar from those of Tocqueville. The great Frenchman had noted in 1831 that the United States is “exceptional,” different from other western nations in its organizing principles and political and religious institutions.³ He and many others since have emphasized that the United States is an outlier among nations. It has greater egalitarianism in social relations, higher economic productivity, and considerable social mobility, particularly into elite strata. The

strength of religion, the weakness of the central state, the earlier timing of electoral democracy, ethnic and racial diversity, and the absence of fixed social classes also set the US apart from other nations.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels first evaluated how and in what respects the United States differed sociologically from European societies in the nineteenth century. America was a new nation and society. It was the most democratic country politically, and it lacked most of the hierarchical institutions and traditions of previously feudal societies and the acceptance of a strong state derived from monarchical legitimacy. As a result, the US had the most “modern and purely bourgeois culture.”

Recognizing after Marx’s death that socialist movements were not emerging on a mass scale in the US, Engels attributed the political backwardness of the American workers to the absence of a feudal past. Thus, he wrote in 1890, Americans “are born conservatives—just because America is so purely bourgeois, so entirely without a feudal past and therefore proud of its purely bourgeois organization.”⁴ Two years later, Engels noted, “It is... quite natural, that in such a young country, which has never known feudalism and has grown up on a bourgeois basis from the first, bourgeois prejudices should also be so strongly rooted in the working class.”⁵

Famed German sociologist Max Weber, among others, also emphasized that the United States was the only pure bourgeois country—the only one that was not post-feudal, that was without “medieval antecedents or complicating institutional heritage.”⁶ Similar arguments were made in the 1920s by the most profound Communist theoretician, Antonio Gramsci.⁷ Both Weber and Gramsci pointed to America’s unique origins and consequent value system as a source of its economic and political development. These values encompassed both secular liberal laissez-faire and America’s distinctive individualistic religious tradition. The latter was based on the dominance of the Protestant sects that, as Weber emphasized, facilitated the rise of capitalism.⁸

American radicals have generally been more sympathetic to libertarianism and to the control of government and industry by the workers than to state control. American criticisms of the existing order have always been permeated by suspicion, if not hostility, toward central-

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ized power. The essence of this heritage may be described as “anti-statism,” “libertarianism,” or, more provocatively, “anarchism,” and is a direct legacy of American history.⁹ The revolutionary Americans, having liberated themselves from a tyrannical king, feared the power of a unified, central state. They sought to preclude tyranny by dividing power among different political bodies, all subordinated to a Bill of Rights that limited government authority.

This heritage may be seen in the behavior of the American labor movement. Both the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its radical competitor, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), regarded the state as an enemy and felt that government-owned industry would be much more difficult for workers and unions to resist than private companies.

There is also a striking similarity between the orientation of the IWW and that of the latter-day New Left, both of which emphasized individualism and anti-statism.¹⁰ One of the most influential academic stimulators of the early New Left, William Appleman Williams, expressed his anti-statism in his strong preference for Herbert Hoover over Franklin Roosevelt. He noted that Hoover proposed not to strengthen the power of the central state but favored “voluntaristic but nevertheless organized cooperation within and between each major sector of the economy.”¹¹

These conceptions of the United States have been described by Irving Howe, the leading American socialist intellectual of the second half of the twentieth century, as the essence of “American exceptionalism.” He writes that American exceptionalism

has often taken the guise of a querulous anti-statism.... It can veer toward an American version of anarchism, suspicious of all laws, forms, and regulations.... Tilt toward the right and you have the worship of ‘the free market;’ tilt toward the left and you have the moralism of American reformers, even the syndicalism of the IWW.¹²

Pre-World War I socialists did not limit the analyses of the failure of socialism to unique cultural variables. In the 1890s Engels also cited economic growth and the prosperity of the US as being among the “very great and peculiar difficulties for a continuous development of a workers’ party.” In contrasting the situation in the two great English-speaking nations, he noted, “The native American workingman’s standard of living is considerably higher than even that of the British, and that alone suffices to place him in the rear [politically] for still some time to come.”¹³ Two years later, he emphasized that in America prosperity actually reached the workers, and did not simply fill the coffers of the bourgeoisie.¹⁴

Marx and Engels also focused on social mobility, stressing the constant state of flux that seemed to characterize the social classes.¹⁵ Engels, like Tocqueville over a half century earlier, was struck by the American ideal of a nation “without a permanent and hereditary proletariat.”¹⁶ These conclusions are significant, since Karl Marx thought that the mass of Americans felt the system assured them of the opportunity to rise and actually believed they were living in an egalitarian society.¹⁷

Racial heterogeneity and large-scale immigration were also considered stumbling blocks to American radicalism. Marx and Engels pointed to the role of ethnic diversity in undermining class consciousness by giving native-born white workers a privileged position, thus enabling the bourgeoisie to play workers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds against one another.

Most analyses of the prospects for socialism in America published in the late 1890s and early years of the twentieth century continued to emphasize that American democratic political institutions inhibited workers from recognizing their class situation. In much of Europe, socialist parties had gained strength while fighting for elementary political rights, particularly for the right to vote, which Americans had secured *prior* to industrialization. Lenin emphasized that the weak-

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ness of socialism in America stemmed from “the absence of any at all big, nation-wide democratic tasks facing the proletariat.” American socialism was weak precisely because it was dealing with “the most firmly established democratic systems, which confront the proletariat with purely socialist tasks.” Correspondingly, he noted that the German Social Democrats were powerful because they worked in “a country where the bourgeois-democratic revolution was still incomplete,” where “military despotism, embellished with parliamentary forms prevailed, and still prevails.”¹⁸

Socialist leader Morris Hillquit argued, on the other hand, that it was the American electoral system that discouraged socialism. “Since a new party rarely seems to have the chance or prospect of electing its candidate for governor of a state or president of the country,” he wrote, “the voter is inclined in

advance to consider its entire ticket as hopeless. The fear of 'throwing away' the vote is thus a peculiar product of American politics, and it requires a voter of exceptional strength of conviction to overcome it."¹⁹ The major parties, particularly the Democrats, thus tended to absorb radical protest within their own electoral coalitions.

It is obvious that America and the rest of the western world have changed greatly over the past two centuries. Each nation has become industrialized, urbanized, and better educated. The post-feudal elements that existed in many European countries, and facilitated class-conscious politics, have declined enormously. In social structural terms, they are becoming Americanized, a phenomenon reflected in the fact that, as of 2000, almost all European socialist parties support a market economy and have given up on socialism.

The argument that the more developed America would, indeed, herald this future—a *non*-socialist one—was formulated in 1940 by Lewis Corey, an early leader of the American Communist Party who had become an independent Marxist. Corey wrote in prescient terms that,

Rather than being an exception, America was actually the model for capitalist countries. Only the positions in the race had been changed; European socialists could see in America the image of their own unhappy future. Far from being a unique or even only slightly different case, America was the prototype for capitalism. In a curious reversal of roles, it was now the European socialists who could look across the ocean to see the future of their own movement.²⁰

And as we have now seen, all of the European social democratic parties have moved over to the politics and economics of the American Democratic party. As a British banker commented after the election of Tony Blair's New Labour party, it is no longer "socialists versus capitalists, it is now Democrats versus Republicans."

The similarities that have been produced, however, still leave important differences. The United States and Europe continue to differ along lines that flow from their distinctive national traditions, although many now resemble America in economic structural terms. Not only has the United States never had a significant socialist movement, but as of the year 2000, it has the weakest labor movement and remains the least statist western nation in terms of public effort, ownership, taxes, welfare benefits and public employment.²¹ Not surprisingly, as Everett Ladd documented, cross-national polls continue to reveal that Americans are much less favorable to an active role of government in the economy and large welfare programs than Canadians and Europeans.

Similar conclusions about the left in the US have been reached by radical sociologist Richard Flacks. In a review of the recent leftist literature on the sources of radicalism, he also stresses the exceptional character of America. He sums up his analysis by saying that "none of the conditions that the tradition of the left has theorized to be requisite for the emergence of either mass allegiance to socialism, or a party representing the majority of the working class, have been present in the United States." He argues that if one had sought to plan a society in order to minimize the prospects for a socialist movement, "one could not have done much better than to implement the social development that has, mostly unplanned, constituted America."²²

Endnotes

- ¹Karl Marx, *Capital I* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958), pp. 8-9.
- ²Max Beer, *Fifty Years of International Socialism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935), pp. 109-110.
- ³Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Vol. II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 36-37.
- ⁴Friedrich Engels to Sorge, February 8, 1890, in *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), p. 467.
- ⁵Engels to Sorge, December 31, 1892, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 501; Engels to Sorge, February 8, 1890, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 467.
- ⁶Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1935; first published in German), pp. 55-56.
- ⁷Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 21-22, 272, 318.
- ⁸Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 155-183; and Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *Essays in Sociology*, trans. by Hans Gerth and C.W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 309, 313.
- ⁹David DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 4, 32-34.
- ¹⁰Charles Derber, *What's Left? Radical Politics in the Post-Communist Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 140-161.
- ¹¹William Appleman Williams, *The Great Evasion* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), p. 155.
- ¹²Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 136.
- ¹³Engels to Sorge, October 24, 1891, in *Letters to Americans 1848-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), p. 237.
- ¹⁴Engels to Sorge, December 2, 1893, "Unpublished Letters of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to Americans," *Science and Society* 1938, Vol. 2, p. 375.
- ¹⁵Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1936) p. 324.
- ¹⁶Engels to Florence Kelley Wischnewetsky, June 3, 1886, in *Selected Correspondence*, p. 449.
- ¹⁷Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1970), pp. 111-118.
- ¹⁸Lenin, "Preface to the Russian Translation," p. 61.
- ¹⁹Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1910), pp. 359-360.
- ²⁰Harvey Klehr, "The Theory of American Exceptionalism," Ph.D. Dissertation. Department of History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1971. The full discussion of Fraina-Corey is on pp. 126-130.
- ²¹Richard Rose, "How Exceptional is American Government?" *Studies in Public Policy* 150 (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1985).
- ²²Richard Flacks, *Making History: The Radical Tradition in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 115.